

Why did Greek actors wear Masks?

David Wiles

Why did Greek actors wear masks? When the human face is so expressive, why blot it out? How can the actor of Oedipus or Clytaemnestra portray the necessary depths of suffering when deprived of the actor's best tool of communication? Masks are things that we associate with the walls of anthropological museums, or perhaps we enjoyed playing with masks when we were children... but why in modern theatre are they almost never used? If children like masks, is that because they are unsophisticated, or is it *our* problem that we have lost touch with childhood? If American Indians, Eskimos, Africans and Pacific Islanders wear masks, is that because their cultures are primitive, or is it again *our* problem, that we have lost touch with the natural world and the world of the spirit?

Masks and Ritual

You may perhaps have experimented, playing a scene of Greek tragedy with makeshift cardboard masks. The exercise is always revealing. You were probably impressed by the instant sense of the primitive, and the feeling that these characters are archetypes, figures of ancient ritual. But second time around, you doubtless became bored with ritual theatre. The problem with rituals is that they keep repeating themselves... are always the same...

So why did Greek actors wear masks? One 'ritualist' line of response links masks with the cult of Dionysus. The early actor is thought to have been a shaman, a man whose magic brought healing to the audience. Such religious explanations of the mask relate to the uncanny experience we always have, seeing a person we know putting on a mask and becoming a person we suddenly fail to recognise. They relate also to the feeling one can have – when putting on a mask of being cut off from the world, suddenly free to act without the normal inhibitions, feeling driven sometimes to do very strange things.

Working with masks

I have just spent a week working with a professional mask-maker, Michael Chase, and a small group of actors. We wanted to see how Greek masks work when worn in different environments. If you have experimented with masks that covered the head, you probably found that masks muffled the voice. Peter Hall never overcame this problem when experimenting with Greek masks. Michael Chase is interested in discovering how the mask functioned as a musical instrument (he was inspired in this work by a Greek mask-maker called Thanos Vovolis), and he has been working out how to make the mask resonate, taking the mask to be an echo chamber like the wooden shell of a violin. He has been experimenting with rabbit-skin glue and other traditional as well as modern materials to create a light but hard shell. He uses wooden sound-posts like the posts inside a violin to keep the mask away from the actor's skull in order for the resonance to work. The smallest piece of foam padding destroys the effect. To make these masks is a complicated business, involving much trial and error, but it is clear from the successes that he has uncovered aspects of the ancient technique.

The actors who first performed the plays of Aeschylus and

Sophocles did not have the wonderful acoustics of Epidaurus at their disposal. They needed the acoustical support of the mask if they were to communicate every nuance of their complex texts to an audience of fifteen thousand or more spectators, stretching 100 metres up the hillside. One of the great differences between theatre now and theatre then is that now theatre normally happens indoors. The room or theatre is itself a resonance chamber which the actor learns to use, so the mask indoors becomes a duplication, an acoustical irrelevance. Experimenting outdoors, in the Roman amphitheatre at Cirencester, we felt how the sound was richer and stronger. Michael compares the technique of the mask to the technique of the microphone. If you hold the microphone in different positions relative to the mouth, you get different sorts of sound; likewise if you direct the voice into the chin of the mask, or the cheek, or the upper lip, you get different qualities of sound. More bass was noted in the chin, sharper consonants in the cheek. The mask is a resonance chamber, not a megaphone: one of the unexpected corollaries is that the actor can turn his back and still be heard. The voice which emerges from the resonant mask is an enriched voice, both the actor's own voice and something more. This doubleness gives some sense that when Oedipus or Clytaemnestra speak in a Greek tragedy, their voice has been transmitted from another world. The masked voice was felt to be more personal, in the sense of touching deeper emotions, but less individual.

The compelling mask

It was also clear, working in Cirencester, that the mask has an equivalent optical importance. The masked figure holds the attention, the naked face does not; the masked face can be identified at a great distance as a face rather than a blur. Seeing and listening are crucially bound up with each other, for we hear better when we focus visually on the mouth that we take to be speaking; at the same time we see better when the words guide us towards the meaning of the gestures. In modern indoor theatres, it is crucial to have a view of the actor's eyes, and spectators up in the 'gods' of a West End theatre know that the hidden cost of their cheap seats is a lower quality experience. In the theatres of classical Greece, to be distant was less of a problem. It was democratic principle that everyone should have the full experience. Watching Michael's actors performing the *Oresteia* in a tent in the Stroud festival, I found it frustrating to be so close. I was always aware of the face beneath the mask, and my awareness of the actors obstructed my response to the story, to Aeschylus' play. Greek plays presented epic events on a cosmic scale that embraced humans and gods, and that sense of scale is always lost when the plays are revived in small indoor spaces. The mask was a tool that allowed the actor to expand.

We worked with the masks one evening in the market-place in Stroud, where a heckler – who seemed in some way to feel threatened by the presence of the masks – remorselessly condemned the actors as weirdos who needed psychiatric treatment. We wondered why the masks disturbed him so deeply, but we also sensed some truth in what he was saying. The masks were out of place in a medieval market place imbued with the traces of a different, urban civilization. When we worked in a

quarry at dawn, overlooking Stroud and the Severn estuary beyond, we had a sense of belonging. When Athene strode across the rocks to find the cave of the Furies, or the Herald looked at a distant Troy in the Welsh mountains, we felt that actors declaiming Greek lines in bare faces would have been the anomaly, the absurdity. The masks took the human wearers away from their individual, civilized identities, and turned them into things, presences, that belonged to the rocks, reflected the changing light and had a gaze intense enough to see across the distant water.

Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London.

Acting with the whole body

The last stage of the experiment was to carry what we had learned to the more controlled conditions of the Victorian Greek theatre at Bradfield. Spontaneous discoveries made in the amphitheatre and the quarry had now to be transformed by means of technique. How does one create the sensation of walking across rocks, or gazing over the Aegean, while confined to a flat circular space? One of Michael's most important exercises involved stretching and massaging the feet, so that the walk expressed what the face did not. The dominant tradition of Shakespearean acting in the twentieth century has required the actor to use the chest as a resonator. Using the centre of the body as a stable centre to create sound, the 'Shakespearean' actor is not encouraged to be particularly limber and physically mobile. 'Presence' is associated with stillness. The Greek actor who aimed to create/make resonance in the head was much freer to be expressive with the rest of the body. And of course, because of the greater distance, it was imperative that the whole body should be used. The theatre at Bradfield is a unique and wonderful resource, and we are grateful to the School for permission to use the space; however, we quickly realised that the orchestra was too small, designed as a space for declamation rather than physical expression. The masks felt confined, and needed to stray onto the front rows of seating in order to represent epic relationships. We lacked and longed for the sound quality provided by a Greek earth floor, and resented the twang of concrete.

One of the oldest debates about tragedy concerns the issue of 'tragic pleasure'. Why is it that people enjoy the spectacle of suffering? For Michael Chase, people playing strong emotions without a mask look ugly; the simulated anguish of the actor puts people off. The mask, on the other hand, is an object of beauty and people are attracted by the movements of the masked actor. The lost art of the Greek mask-maker must have been closely related to the art of the sculptor, for the mask-maker would have begun with a clay image of the face he wanted, before taking a mould. The evidence of vases suggests that theatre masks had the same impassivity as monumental sculptures. It was the voice and movement of the actor that had to animate the mask. Michael taught us during the project to 'inhabit' the mask, to 'charge' the mask. In some cultures a spirit inhabits ancestral masks, and the wearer needs to submit him or herself to that spirit, but in Michael's perception of Greek masks it is more a question of teaching a role to the mask. Much work remains to be done in uncovering the techniques of masked acting. The necessary starting point must be to recognise the strangeness of what we habitually do in our own theatrical culture, to twist and distort our faces to give a strange voyeuristic satisfaction to people cooped up in a darkened room.

For more information about the work of Michael Chase, see <http://www.mask-studio.co.uk/>

David Wiles has recently produced not one but two books on the performance of Greek drama. His Tragedy in Athens: Performance space and theatrical meaning and Greek Theatre Performance, an introduction are both published by Cambridge University Press. He teaches in the Department of Drama and